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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/I. NSC FOR PHEE AND VROOMAN.

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SUBJECT: A/S FELTMAN DISCUSSES IRAQI REGIONAL INTEGRATION
AND U.S.-IRAN ENGAGEMENT WITH ISCI CHAIRMAN AMMAR AL-HAKIM

REF: A. A) BAGHDAD 3359

[B](#). B) BAGHDAD 147

[C](#). C) BAGHDAD 153

Classified By: A/DCM GARY A. GRAPPO FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: A/S Feltman met with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) Chairman Ammar al-Hakim on January 23 to discuss Iraq's role in the region and Hakim's recent regional engagement efforts. Hakim stressed the importance of Iraq's regional integration and the need for Arab states to overcome fear of Iraqi democracy and increase engagement. With regard to U.S.-Iranian engagement, Hakim noted that openness to engagement comes at a political cost to both Washington and Tehran and suggested that the best arena to begin a constructive dialogue is likely behind closed doors and not in the media spotlight. He also commented on the need to move beyond the current de-Ba'athification crisis, noting that the problem is not with the entire list of barred candidates, but rather with 3-4 public figures included on that list. END SUMMARY.

PROMOTING IRAQ'S REGIONAL INTEGRATION

[2](#). (C) In his meeting with Hakim January 23, A/S Feltman stressed that ensuring Iraq's regional integration is a top U.S. priority and factors into U.S. relations with neighboring states. Hakim welcomed this, but believed that Arab states alone could not be blamed for the problems between Iraq and neighboring countries. He noted that while Iraq was undergoing countless changes in building what he referred to as the "Iraqi experiment," Arab states were left unsure of how to deal with the new Iraq and were slow to develop relations. Hakim told the Assistant Secretary that he has spoken with Arab leaders and requested they speak with the Saudi leadership and work to open a Saudi-Iraqi dialogue, but noted that the Arab leaders with whom he had spoken were reluctant to do so at this time, preferring to wait until the results of the Iraqi election were known (Ref A).

[3](#). (C) Hakim acknowledged that the institution of democracy, openness of Iraqi press, presence of female parliamentarians capable of questioning Ministers, proportion of Shi'a and Kurds in the government, and large presence of U.S. forces on Iraqi soil all provoke fear in the Arab world. Badr bloc leader Hadi al-Amiri, who was also present at the meeting, commented that Arab states have both justified and unjustified fears relative to Iraq. Amiri said that neighboring states are justified in their trepidation toward engagement with Iraq given the way the previous regime was

deposed through external intervention and occupation, and replaced by democracy, a method of regime change and type of governance which other countries fear could be exported elsewhere. He said that when visiting Arab states, he is consistently told that countries do not want to have relations with a new Iraqi government formed out of occupation

¶4. (C) Hakim said that Iran is often used as a scapegoat to mask Arab states' fears of engaging with a democratic Iraq, noting that people worry when there is a perception of an outside agenda or money being spent to influence Iraq. A/S Feltman stressed that the U.S. message to neighboring states is that if they are concerned about Iranian interests in and Qis that if they are concerned about Iranian interests in and relations with Iraq, then those countries should be engaging with Iraq as well. Hakim agreed, stating that Iraq has asked Arab states to understand the Iraqi relationship with Iran, given the large shared border, and has encouraged Arab states to build similar relations with Iraq for their mutual benefit.

HAKIM'S STATEMENT ON THE PRESENCE OF U.S. FORCES IN IRAQ

¶5. (C) A/S Feltman expressed U.S. appreciation for Hakim's recent statement on the importance of the bilateral security agreement and his moderate message on countering the idea of armed resistance. Hakim acknowledged that the idea of Iraq and the U.S. "exporting democratic revolution" also provokes fear in the region, noting that he has published articles stating that Iraq is not in the practice of exporting democracy and believes other countries must make decisions

for themselves.

U.S. ENGAGEMENT WITH TEHRAN

¶6. (C) A/S Feltman commented that President Obama's decision to open U.S. policy for engagement with Iran did not come without political costs, and that while the door for engagement will remain open, there likely will be a sharpening of the U.S. position if Tehran continues to not play by the international rules on the nuclear issue. Hakim commented that while President Obama paid a certain political price for trying to engage with Iran, Washington cannot forget that the Iranian leadership will also pay a large price for engagement with Washington, as the Iranian regime's mantra is in large part based on opposition to the U.S. Hakim saw it as a good sign that Supreme Leader Khamenei condoned Iranian engagement with the U.S. He observed that Tehran often perceives U.S. statements as intentionally confusing. Regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, Hakim said that when Tehran signs certain nuclear commitments, it is immediately portrayed in the media as a form of Iranian containment. As such, Tehran then makes changes to such commitments to counter what is perceived as international efforts to control them.

¶7. (C) Hakim also said that the Iranian government thinks Washington does not appreciate Iranian contributions in areas such as Afghanistan, or give them the historic and regional role they deserve. Hakim believed that the best method to begin engagement would be for Tehran and Washington to hold a constructive bilateral dialogue behind closed doors and away from the media. He said that he had heard from Vice President Abd al-Mahdi that Iranian President Ahmedinejad is ready for relations with the U.S.

IRAQI RELATIONS WITH EGYPT, SYRIA, AND QATAR

¶8. (C) A/S Feltman asked Hakim for his views as to why Egypt had chosen to establish relations when other countries had not. Hakim said that because Egypt was a large and diverse

country, the GOE was perhaps more open to changes. Hakim said that while the GOI and GOE had reached several agreements, there were no mechanisms in place to follow up on them. Hakim said that dialogue with Syria should be based on mutual interest, and that when Syria finds it to be in its national interest to deal with the new Iraqi government, Syria's approach will change. He stressed that Syria should not be supporting Ba'athists in Iraq. One commonality between Syria and Iran, he observed, is that when either nation is looked at as an enemy, they are prompted to become more extreme in their thinking and action. With regard to Qatar, Hakim noted that Qatari politics are based on fear of Saudi Arabia. A/S Feltman speculated that Qatar was giving positive signals about its intention to establish diplomatic relations with Iraq, a possibility which Hakim welcomed.

RECENT TRIP TO BEIRUT AND MEETING WITH NASRALLAH

¶9. (C) When asked about his recent meeting with Lebanese Hizballah head Hassan Nasrallah on January 20, Hakim stated that to meet him was a difficult chore as he was forced to go unaccompanied and for security measures was repeatedly unaccompanied and for security measures was repeatedly shuffled from vehicle to vehicle en route to Nasrallah. Hakim described it as being "taken into the unknown," but said that the meeting was very friendly and that he found Nasrallah, as well as all others with whom he met in Beirut, very optimistic about affairs in Lebanon

U.S.-IRAQ: MOVING TOWARD NORMALIZATION

¶10. (C) A/S Feltman stressed the need for Iraq and the U.S. to be long-term partners and questioned why Iraq's neighbors do not see the importance of forming similarly strong partnerships. Hakim said that he is happy to see the U.S. shift toward non-military relations with Iraq, noting that he sees the withdrawal of U.S. forces not as an end, but as a

beginning with relations between the two nations on the correct path.

DE-BA'ATHIFICATION

¶11. (C) A/S Feltman stressed that Vice President Biden's trip to Iraq was in no way intended to dictate a solution to de-Ba'athification. He reiterated the Vice President's statement that the U.S. wants to break the perception that Washington wants a return of the Ba'ath Party to power, especially after the price paid by both the U.S. and Iraq to establish an Iraqi democracy. A/S Feltman praised Hakim for his practical idea on how to develop a political solution for the de-Ba'athification crisis (Ref B). Hakim agreed that it is important for Iraqis to decide on and resolve their own internal issues. He said that the Iraqi national election should be conducted with transparency and that the GOI should stay away from highlighting constitutional and legal gaps, so that the election will be viewed as credible and accepted by all. Hakim noted that Iraqi politicians are working to fix the de-Ba'athification issue, and said that ISCI has been in dialogue with many parties regarding this matter. Hakim said that one solution is to form an Accountability and Justice Commission (AJC) quickly that is elected and confirmed by the COR, and which could facilitate the review process. (Note: Speaker Samarra'i on January 26 closed the second term of the Iraqi COR and as such, it is unlikely that AJC commissioners will be approved by the current COR unless an extraordinary session is called. End Note.)

¶12. (C) Hakim said he thought there is a lot of exaggeration regarding the targeting of Sunnis through the list of barred candidates and said that in reality two thirds of those listed are Shi'a. (Note: Hakim did not provide any further

information on the breakdown of Sunnis and Shi'a listed and Emboffs do not have a full sectarian breakdown of those barred. However, IHEC Chairman told Emboffs that at least 50% of the list was Shi'a. End Note.) (Ref C) Hakim said that many individuals previously presented their association with the Ba'ath Party to receive their pensions, which would be an easy way to verify Ba'ath Party membership. Hakim said that once the confirmed cases of those with Ba'ath Party membership were removed, there would remain only a limited number who would need to go through the appeal process. Hakim said the problem was not with the overall list, but with the inclusion of 3-4 public figures on the list. When asked if there would be sufficient time to resolve this situation and print ballots, Hakim said that he thought if a COR-approved AJC was formed from various entities, the whole issue does not appear as daunting as it does now. Hakim said that even with 500 names to review, it should not be that time consuming.

GOVERNMENT FORMATION AND INA ALLIANCE BUILDING

¶13. (C) With regard to the government formation process, Hakim said that if the election results and the winners are accepted by the Iraqi public, then the government formation process should be smooth. Hakim said that ISCI makes an effort to bring people together and has exerted great effort to bring itself to the forefront again politically. Hakim Qto bring itself to the forefront again politically. Hakim said that there is a long history between ISCI and the Kurds based on mutual trust and understanding, and he believed a wider political front could be formed in the future. He thought that Barzani and Talabani are strong Kurdish partners. Additionally, Hakim believed that partnerships could be formed with the Sunnis as well, commenting that ISCI had been able to build some trust with Sunni groups.

¶14. (U) Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman approved this cable.
HILL